



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE POETRY OF PERCY B. SHELLEY AND
WALT WHITMAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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FBMK 2003 4

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By

HANITA MOHD. MOKHTAR

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
in Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts**

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DEDICATION

Bismillahirrahmanurrahim.

To my wonderful husband, Andrew Hafez Ritchie, for the love and encouragement – you are my strength. To my angels, Hannah Ayesha Ritchie and Aidan Hakim Ritchie, for the endless hugs and kisses – you are my sanity. To my beloved mother Rokiah Abu Bakar, for the sacrifices, constant help and patience – only *Allah* can truly reward you. To my friend, Edni Zyda Dato' Abdul Aziz, for being the best pal anyone could ever have. To my one and only brother, Abu Hassan Mohd Mokhtar, for always believing in me and telling me so. And to the memory of my late father, Mohd Mokhtar Abdullah – I miss you, so come hold me....

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts:

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Chairman: Professor Dr. Muhammad Abdul Quayum Abdul Salam

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This comparative study illustrates the depiction of images of women in the selected poems of Percy B. Shelley and Walt Whitman. Analysis of the poems looks into poetical matters that include the themes of the respective texts and how the images of women are presented in the framework of the selected poems. It is also another contribution to the continuing tradition and fascination with neo-platonic thought among the Romantics. It also explores the fundamental aesthetic differences between Shelley and Whitman, and shows another facet in the comparative studies of English and American Romantic poems.

Analysis of the respective poets' depictions of women shows that Shelley and Whitman can indeed be linked in relation to their roles as poets and as philosophers. Both poets highlight the significant role of women in their treatment of the images. However, their individual approaches in presenting the circumstances in which the images are depicted are different, and the images presented are primarily connected to the poets' respective worldviews. Shelley is individual, passionate and concrete in his presentation of women as specific female characters are the subjects in the

selected poems. Whitman, however, is more abstract and universal in his presentation of women as they are presented as mother, sister or lover, and unlike Shelley's women, these characters are interspersed throughout *Leaves of Grass*, amidst the crowds and the great amount of space that is characteristic of Whitman's poems.

The ideas suggested by both poets in their presentation of women, although governed by their respective philosophies, are undoubtedly revolutionary. Ultimately, this study illustrates the vast scope of image interpretation in the study of literary works in general and encourages more studies on the images of women, particularly, in the works of other Romantic and Transcendental poets.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera.

**IMEJ WANITA DI DALAM PUISI PERCY B. SHELLEY DAN WALT
WHITMAN: SATU KAJIAN PERBANDINGAN**

Oleh

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Julai 2003

Pengerusi: Profesor Dr. Muhammad Abdul Quayum Abdul Salam

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Fokus kajian perbandingan ini adalah berkenaan paparan imej wanita di dalam sajak-sajak Percy B. Shelley dan Walt Whitman. Analisa terperinci melihat kepada aspek puitis yang melibatkan tema dan penyampaian imej di dalam sajak-sajak yang dipilih khas untuk kajian ini. Selain daripada itu kajian ini turut menyumbang kepada tradisi pemikiran “neo-platonic” di kalangan penyajak kumpulan Romantik. Kajian ini juga mendalami ciri-ciri asas estetika di dalam analisa perbezaan di antara Shelley dan Whitman khususnya, dan di antara kumpulan penyajak Romantik Inggeris dan Amerika secara amnya.

Analisa menunjukkan bahawa Shelley dan Whitman boleh dikaitkan dari segi peranan mereka sebagai penyajak dan dari segi falsafah masing-masing. Kedua penyajak ini menekankan kepentingan peranan wanita melalui imej yang dipaparkan di dalam sajak mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, cara mereka memaparkan imej adalah berbeza dan berkait dengan “worldview” mereka yang tersendiri. Shelley menunjukkan ciri “individual”, mendalam dan konkrit di dalam paparan wanita di

mana watak wanita memainkan peranan utama di dalam sajak-sajak yang dipilih untuk kajian ini. Whitman pula menunjukkan ciri-ciri yang lebih abstrak dan menyeluruh (“universal”) di dalam paparan wanita, khasnya sebagai ibu, saudara perempuan dan kekasih. Seterusnya, paparan beliau berbeza daripada paparan Shelley kerana watak-watak wanita boleh didapati tersebar luas di seluruh antologi *Leaves of Grass*, dan dikerumini watak-watak lain di tempat-tempat yang amat luas, iaitu satu ciri yang sering didapati di dalam sajak-sajak Whitman.

Idea yang dicadangkan oleh kedua penyajak di dalam paparan imej wanita masing-masing adalah ditentukan oleh falsafah mereka dan seterusnya menunjukkan ciri-ciri “revolutionary”. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa secara amnya terdapat skop yang luas di dalam bidang interpretasi imej dan secara khususnya menggalakan lebih lagi kajian ke atas paparan imej wanita di dalam sajak-sajak yang dihasilkan oleh ahli-ahli kumpulan penyajak Romantik dan Transendentalis yang lain.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 7th July 2003 to conduct the final examination of Hanita Mohd Mokhtar on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “Images of Women in the Poetry of Percy B. Shelley and Walt Whitman: A Comparative Study” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.


HANITA MOHD MOKHTAR

Date: 3rd September 2003

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents preliminary information that serves as the framework of this study, namely: the background details on the concept of images, the reasons for selecting Percy B. Shelley and Walt Whitman as subjects of this study, the problem statement of the study, the significance and objectives of this study, the scope and limitations, definitions of key terms, and the methodology used for analysis of the selected poems.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The Concept Of Images

The study of poetry, as believed by Russian Formalists, entails a special way of thinking in images and this results in aesthetic feeling. This belief has led to incredible interpretations of individual works of art. There have also been many attempts to evaluate music, architecture, and lyric poetry as “imagistic thought.” As this study deals with images, it is first essential to note the background of the study of images, as explained below.

Over the years, this belief of thinking in images has survived mainly in the study of symbols. This is because symbol interpretation requires the identification of images or imagery. Many still believe that thinking in images – specific scenes of “roads and landscape” and “furrows and boundaries” (Shklovsky 17) – is a principal characteristic of poetry. Various methods have also been employed in producing poems in different eras. As a result, “the works of poets are classified or grouped according to the new techniques that poets discover and share, according to their arrangement and development of the resources of language” (Shklovsky 17).

“Image” and “imagery” are among the most widely used and poorly understood terms in poetic theory. This is because they occur in so many different contexts that sometimes, it may be hard to provide any rational, systematic account of their usage. However, a poetic image can invariably be considered as a metaphor, simile, or figure of speech. It can also represent a concrete verbal reference, a recurrent motif, and psychological events in the reader’s mind. In addition, a poetic image can also be a symbol or symbolic pattern or the global impression of a poem as a unified structure.

The term’s use and meaning have also changed radically at various points in the history of Western poetics. In traditional rhetorical theory, the term “image” has a lesser function, as related notions such as “figure” and “trope” are the dominant terms. According to *The New Princeton Dictionary of Poetry and Poetics*, R. Frazer, in *The Origin of the Term Image* argues that the term first became important to English criticism in the 17th century, possibly under the influence of empiricist models of the

mind. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke also used the term as a major factor in their explanation of sensation, perception, memory, imagination, and language – thereby developing a “picture theory” of consciousness as a system of receiving, storing and retrieving mental images. In addition, images are regarded as a means for the poet to provide a better description of nature for instance, because “the reader finds a scene drawn in stronger colours and painted more to the life in his imagination by the help of words than by an actual survey of the scene which they describe” (Preminger and Brogan 556).

In Romantic and Post-romantic poetics, the image continues in a sublime and refined form. It is often defined in opposition to, what Edmund Burke called, “mental pictures” and “painted,” ornamental images of 18th century poetry (qtd. in Preminger and Brogan 557). Samuel T. Coleridge, for example, termed symbols as “living educts,” allegory as “picture language,” and imagination and fancy as “creative images” and “remembered images” respectively, thereby suggesting that the romantic image, which is particularly sensuous and exude a high level of aesthetic quality, as being “higher,” inward, and intellectual as compared with previous thoughts on and treatment of images. Hence, the notion of the romantic image is made more superior, subtle and active than its neoclassical predecessor by the poetic “symbol” which makes the poetic process an “expressive” rather than “mimetic” (qtd. in Preminger and Brogan 557).

Modern poetics, however, often combines the neoclassical and romantic concepts of the image. It insists on poets making their language concrete and sensuous. At the

same time, poets present a theory of poetic structure that regards the entire poem as a kind of matrix, as if the poem were an abstract image. As suggested by Ezra Pound, theorist of the poetic movement Imagism: “The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is a . . . vortex, from which ideas are constantly rushing” (qtd. in Wellek and Warren 187). This is because Pound believes that poetry should avoid fancy language, abstractions, and explanations, and instead should present images as objectively as possible to provide the strongest vehicle for readers to react emotionally. Like Hemingway in prose, Pound turns away from what is regarded as the “emotional slither” and abstract rhetoric of Romantic and Victorian writers towards an emphasis on precision and concision in language and imagery.

Changes in imagery are also an essential component in the development of poetry. This is because images, like all other devices in poetry, are created for aesthetic pleasure. Therefore, the artistry attributed to a given work results from the way we perceive it, because they are created by special techniques designed to make them as obviously artistic as possible.

The critic Middleton Murry, who thinks of similes and metaphors connected with “formal classification” of rhetoric, suggests the use of “image” as a term to include both, but also suggests that we must “resolutely exclude from our minds the suggestion that the image is solely or even predominantly visual. The image may be visual, may be auditory, (or) wholly psychological” (113). Nevertheless, images, according to *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, normally “covers ideas, states of

mind and any sensory or extra sensory experience” (Cuddon 442) and does not only imply a mental picture. This is because one can distinguish between the literal, the conceptual and the perceptual, as illustrated in the lines from “Our lady of Walsingham” by Robert Lowell:

There once the penitents took off their shoes
And then walked barefoot the remaining mile;
And the small tress, a stream and hedgerows file
Slowly along the munching English lane,
Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose
Track of your dragging pain.
The stream flows down under the druid tree,
Shiloah’s whirlpools gurgle and make glad
The castle of God. (Cuddon 443)

In the first two lines we see a literal image that does not contain figurative language. This literal image may or may not reflect a visual image as well. A perceptual image is conveyed by the phrase “hedgerows file slowly” due to the metaphorical use of the word “file.” The phrase “castle of God,” however, is conceptual, because although one can hardly visualize it, one may have an idea of it.

In addition, many images are conveyed by figurative language such as metaphor, simile, onomatopoeia, metonymy and synecdoche. An image can also be represented by any of the five senses (auditory, visual, gustatory, olfactory and tactile) and can be in abstract and kinesthetic form. The former appeals to the intellect and the latter pertains to the sense of movement and bodily effort. Another example can be found in Peter Redgrove’s “Lazarus and the Sea” which displays all of the aforementioned kinds of images:

The tide of my death came whispering like this
Soiling my body with its tireless voice.

I scented the antique moistures when they sharpened
 The air of my room, made the rough wood of my bed,
 (most dear),
 Standing out like roots in my tall grave.
 They slopped in my mouth and entered my plaited blood
 Quietened my jolting breath with soft argument
 Of such measured insistence, untied the great knot of my heart.
 They spread like whispered conversations. (Cuddon 443)

What should be noted is that an image is not exclusively one thing or another as it may intermingle and therefore combine with other images. Hence, the kinesthetic may also be visual. In the example above, the first two lines are clearly auditory. However, the word “soiling” may suggest tactile, or even have an olfactory association for some. The third line is clearly olfactory. The fourth and fifth lines show a combination of the tactile and visual, and the sixth line combines tactile, olfactory and gustatory. The phrase “Quietened my jolting breath” and “though all the numbered rippling tissues” are kinesthetic, but can also be visual and tactile. “But this calm dissolution / Came after my agreement to it” is visual-cum-kinesthetic. Clearly, the other images in the excerpt also fall readily into one of the categories mentioned.

In the study of images, visual images are not to be looked at exclusively in descriptive poetry, and a few who have attempted to write “imagist” or “physical” poetry have succeeded in restricting themselves to pictures of the external world – even if they did not wish to do so. Pound defined “image” not as a pictorial representation but “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”, an “implication of disparate ideas” (Wellek and Warren 187). Therefore, the visual image is not just a sensation or perception, but also something inner. It can be both presentation and representation at once. The image may exist as a description or as a

metaphor, therefore, even making it possible to function as a symbol. This is because, as stated earlier, when interpreting symbols, it is helpful to identify its image first before analysing the source of that image, whether it is from the natural world, the human body, human-made artifacts, and so on. Then we need to ask whether the imagery is literal or figurative. If it is literal, it may belong to any aspect or combination of concepts in the work such as the setting, point of view, and the like. If the imagery is not literal, then it may be of two types. Firstly, the image is like a vision or an imaginary action and therefore must be understood entirely on a symbolic level. Secondly, the image is an action or situation but is described through the use of metaphors and similes so as to produce an additional level of meaning – by way of expanded, recurred or clustered images.

In due course, we see that a poet's imagery is revelatory of his self, and this is further illustrated in the analysis presented in this study. Mario Praz and Lillian Hornstein suggest from their study of Shakespeare that if the value of image study lies in uncovering something complex it presumably makes it possible for readers and critics to be aware of the true nature of the poet. Images or imagery, like metre, is one component structure of a poem and very much a part of the syntactical or stylistic stratum. Therefore, it must be studied, not in isolation but as an element in the totality and integrity of the literary work (Wellek and Warren 188).

1.1.2 Why Percy B. Shelley And Walt Whitman

The two poets and their works have been selected, not just out of interest, but because both poets have been considered by many as revolutionary and visionary. Both poets lived in revolutionary times and their writings seem to epitomize the eras in which they lived.

The discussion on the images of women, presented later in this study, begins with Shelley. Few poets have aroused as much controversy as Shelley, and over time, Shelley's poetry has not lost its power to send shivers down one's spine or set fire to one's senses. The passion and energy in his poetry, the sometimes, desperate gush of words and images, which are nonetheless contained within strict poetic forms, are universally acknowledged. In "The Triumph of Life," for example, "an extraordinary development of the cultivation of feeling" in the Romantic period is described in the figure of Rousseau with holes for eyes and grass for thin discoloured hair (Watson 324). The use of such imagery is connected with Shelley's stance as a poet, his continuous cultivation of "the imaginative life of feeling" (Watson 324). This emotional stance places the poet in an awkward relationship with the world because reality, as indicated in "The Triumph of Life," sometimes destroys ideals and feelings. Therefore, in one of Shelley's most popular poems, "Ode to the West Wind," the persona cries to the wind:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee, tameless, and swift, and proud (2 53 - 56)

These extraordinary lines show how Shelley has become engaged with his own thoughts so that he becomes almost a part of moving nature – wave, leaf and cloud. Later, in the analysis chapter on Shelley's selected poems, more of Shelley's thoughts are revealed.

Shelley's idealism not only led him to protest against all forms injustice but also rejoice in all manifestations of love and beauty. This is reflected in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," what James A. Noutopoulos regards as Shelley's "natural Platonism" (Watson 329). In this poem, Beauty is described as the unseen power which visits the world, and which appears in evanescent forms:

Like hues and harmonies of evening, –
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread, –
 Like memory of music fled, – (2.8 - 10)

The persona dedicates his powers to Beauty, which he believes will eventually "free / This world from its dark slavery" (6. 69 - 70). More of Shelley's protest against injustice, as well as his concept of the ideal love and beauty is illustrated later in this paper.

Whitman's poetry, on the other hand, is noted for giving stimulus to the free verse movement and many other characteristics of poetry in the later decades. More importantly, Whitman's awareness of the concept of American democracy and his belief in the role poetry played in creating that democracy are revered. In his Preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman refers to the United States as "essentially the greatest poem" (900). He envisioned the self-esteem, candour and attachment to freedom of the "common people" as "unrhymed poetry" which "awaits the gigantic and

generous treatment worthy of it” (900). “Song of Myself” was one of his works that offered such “treatment.” This is made apparent by the hero-cum-persona, Walt Whitman himself, who represents democratic man, further indicated by the form of the poem, which is written in free verse. Its long, flowing lines reflects liberty. In bursting the bonds of stanzaic form and metrical pattern, Whitman reiterates the freedom he discovered in himself and his country. By introducing into his verse and diction as free and easy as his rhyme and rhythm, he was asserting the poetic rights of street language – the language of common people. However, what is more important than his enduring style is the relevance of his substance and his passionate commitment to the self, in keeping with the Transcendental aspects that underlie his works. This is illustrated in many sections of the poem that list characters, places, occupations, or experiences. Section 33, in particular, shows two interesting techniques that give these lists vitality. Firstly, Whitman wrote a long, single sentence on movements of actions and descriptions that seems to unify nature and civilization. Secondly, Whitman interrupts these long listings with more detailed vignettes that show “large hearts of heroes” (822) – a sea captain, a hounded slave, a fireman trapped and broken under debris, and an artilleryman. Later, in the discussion on Whitman, it is illustrated that women are very much a part of these lists.

Moreover, the Transcendental concept of the self as divine is cleverly illustrated through the incorporation of deities from various religions and mythologies in section 41 of the poem:

Magnifying and applying come I,
Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,

Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
 Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,
 Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
 In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix
 engraved,
 With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image, . . .
 Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself, bestowing
 them freely on each man and woman I see." (1026 - 1036)

It is clear from the lines above that Whitman hopes for a universal religion, embracing aspects of all faiths. At the end of the section, the persona likens his future role to that of the creator's – "one of the supremes" – when he will "do as much good as the best, and be as prodigious" (1050 - 1051). "Song of Myself" is but one of the many wondrous poems that Whitman wrote to present life in its whole and to show that to discover him was to discover America. Behind this assumption lay the realization that the identity of America existed not only in her geography, but also in the interior of her democratic man. Whitman knew himself to be such a man, and his simple faith was that in exploring the labyrinth of his own being he would discover the mysteries of the American soul.

According to Julia Power, in *Shelley In America: His Relation to American Critical Thought and His Influence*, what is also interesting to note is that Whitman was acquainted with and interested in Shelley at an early date, as indicated in his scrapbook. What appealed to Whitman were Shelley's generosity, benevolence, and love of man. It is also suggested that Shelley's rebellion at college and his marital relations evoked Whitman's sympathy. Indeed it can be argued that Whitman was interested in Shelley the man, rather than Shelley the poet. But the fact remains that there is much of the man as well as the poet that can be explored in his poems – his political, religious and social

beliefs. Nevertheless, their kinship of inspiration is too significant to ignore as the writer of *Leaves of Grass* and the youthful author of “Queen Mab” seem to have drunk from the same fountain of love and wonder. Hence, some of the general beliefs that they share, as reflected in their depiction of women, is illustrated at the end of this study.

1.1.3 Statement Of The Problem

Many critics have assumed a kind of natural continuum between Europe and America, particularly between English and American literature and culture. Much has been written stressing the influence of Bunyan and Spenser on Hawthorne, or Shakespeare on Melville, but sometimes with very little attention to the revolutionary genius of the American works. However, there has indeed been a radical split between Europe and America – what Thoreau states as “old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new” and what D. H. Lawrence recognized as a “new consciousness” arising from North America, an unfamiliar entity that would cause Europeans to “open new eyes” (Meyer Jr. 75).

Nevertheless, the enquiry into the similarities and differences between Old World and New has resulted in many comparisons such as that, for instance, between English Romantics and American Transcendentalists. Comparisons of this nature mostly revolve around the technical and stylistic aspects of their works, as for instance, on the aural bias of the English Romantics versus the visual bias of the American romantic. As far as images are concerned, the comparisons seem to focus more on